New England Pastor

"One interest will prevail . . . Christ our righteousness."

May/June 2008

What Farmers Tell Us About the End of the World

Looking for the Right Signs

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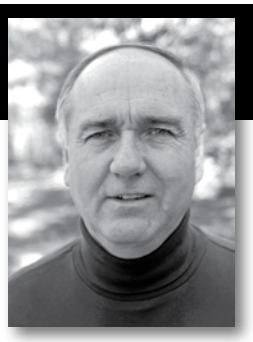
New England Pastor is a bi-monthly magazine for pastors in New England, carrying forth the vision that Ellen White had for the area over a century ago: "I saw that when the message shall increase greatly in power, then the providence of God will open and prepare the way in the East for much more to be accomplished than can be at the present time" (Testimonies for the Church, vol. 1, p. 149,). It is free of charge to those who pastor in New England. For all those living outside of New England who would like to subscribe, please call or email us.



The Beauty of Conversion

by Bill Brace

I simply love conversion stories! I am totally fascinated by them, be they "live" contemporary renditions or ones from the pages and annals of history. And there are two from church history that have given me inspiration for several decades.

The first comes from the life of John Wesley. As you probably remember, Wesley had preached for many years, both in England and on the soil of colonial America. However, it was not until one evening he found himself in a little Bible study (I guess we would call it a "small group setting" today) on Aldersgate Street in busy London that the gospel finally had full sway in his life. Here is the incident in his own words:

> In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, *I felt my heart strangely warmed* [emphasis mine]. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.[1]

Just great stuff!

Wesley went forth from that experience a different man with a new motivation, a deeper fervor than ever, to preach the gospel of salvation and the matchless charms of Christ.

Several years ago, during one of my visits to London, I made it a special project to locate the site of Wesley's conversion. I searched and searched up one street and down another. I was just about ready to give up in frustration when I finally spied it—an inconspicuous sign over a doorway that modestly commemorated that night's (Wednesday, May 24, 1738) effective work of the Spirit. Just a few line's worth. The man that many historians would claim saved England merited only a small sign, which designated the most important moment of his life, on a hidden side street in the bowels of London. Contrast that with the huge monument of the British military hero, Lord Nelson, that towers high and lofty over the scene at Trafalgar Square not far away. Certainly, the values of man are not the values of God.

The second conversion story comes in the life of young Charles Spurgeon, later to be the greatest Baptist preacher of 19th century England. Spurgeon was a pastor's son but unable somehow to connect with God. He heard many different pastors of numerous denominations preach from scripture, but somehow or other he just couldn't come to an understanding of how the gospel worked. Fortunately, he was not easily discouraged.

As a teenager he committed himself to visiting every church and chapel he could find in his hometown. One cold and snowy Sunday, as the story goes, he went out again, somewhat apprehensively, to visit yet another church. But he never made it to his original site of choice. The weather conditions inclined him to enter a little Primitive Methodist Chapel on a side street somewhat short of his intended destination. There were only a few in attendance, and so he decided to sit near the back, under the balcony, to appear as inconspicuous as possible.

The regular pastor never appeared. Instead, a lay person, untrained in the art of preaching, strode into the pulpit. His unrehearsed text that morning was Isaiah 45:22, "Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth." Listen now to how Spurgeon later described that glorious, personal event:

> He did not even pronounce the words rightly, but that did not matter . . . [The man went on to proclaim] A man may be the biggest fool, and yet you can look . . . even a child can look. . . .Then he looked at me under the gallery . . . [and] said, "Young man, you look very miserable." Well, I did; but I had not been accustomed to have remarks made on my personal appearance from the pulpit before. However, it was a good blow, struck right home. He continued, "And you will always be miserable—miserable in life and miserable in death—if you do not obey the text. But if you obey it now, this moment, you will be saved."[2]

Suddenly, Spurgeon realized that the gospel demanded only that we look to be saved. At that moment the clouds

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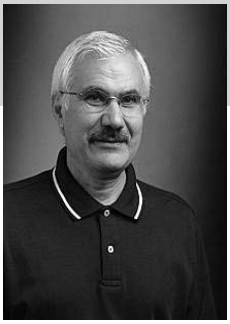

Escape From Iraq—Part 1

by S. Joseph Kidder

One day during the summer of the year 1973, I was spit on, humiliated, beaten almost to death, and thrown out into the street. However, that day—that experience—turned out to be the greatest blessing of my life. I am, in fact, literally alive today because of it.

I come from the biblical city of Nineveh, which is located in Iraq now. At the heart of the downtown area is the grave of Jonah. All the major roads lead to it or go around it, reminding all the people to repent and turn to the mighty God who can give them repentance and forgiveness.

I was born in a very religious Christian home. My parents belonged to the Christian Orthodox Church, which is very similar to the Catholic Church. My mother read the Bible to me daily, and she took me to church every week. I lived a very happy and contented life. But things started to change in my life as a result of one boring afternoon.

On a Friday afternoon in the summer of 1969, my cousin came to spend the afternoon with me. We played backgammon (a favorite pastime in Iraq) for several hours. We played till we got bored. Then we decided to take a walk. We walked and walked till, by accident, or should I say by divine providence, we came to the Adventist Church. There was a sign advertising a movie about the life of Jesus Christ. We were bored—we didn't have anything to do—so we went inside to watch the movie, and that was the beginning of a series of troubles and problems which lasted for several years.

After the movie the pastor gave a devotional message about watchfulness. He said that Christ took His disciples to Gethsemane to stay up and pray with Him. But they slept. What about us? Are we awake with Jesus or are we sleeping?

The message touched my heart so much that I went to the pastor and asked him if he would be willing to study the Bible with me. That Bible study lasted for over four years. I loved everything I learned till we came to a subject that I really hated. I hated it so much that I despised the day I had gone to the Adventist church.

I was confronted with a strange issue—the Sabbath. Which day is the Sabbath? All my life I had thought that Sunday was the Lord's day, the Sabbath day. But through my contact and study with the SDA pastor, I learned that Saturday is the Lord's day, according to the Bible. That confused me and drove me to the Bible to know the truth. It drove me to my knees to pray and ask God to show me the truth.

I struggled to know the truth. I prayed. I cried. I asked God day and night to help me, to show me the right way. And I kept struggling, studying, and praying for two years.

Then when I was convinced that—according to the Bible, according to the New Testament and the example of Jesus Christ—Saturday is the Lord's day, the Sabbath, I was faced with the higher struggle: the struggle to obey God and keep His day holy.

For the next two years I thought of the problems I would face if I took my stand to keep the Sabbath day holy and join the SDA church. I thought of my family and my friends. I knew I would lose them if I started keeping the Sabbath and practicing my newfound faith.

Families in the Middle East are very close. Changing your faith is, in essence, denying your family and going against them and, thus, you deserve to be disowned by them. You become a source of shame for them. I also thought of my school and my education and my job. I would lose all of them because in that country the day off is Friday and everyone has to work the rest of the week, including Saturday and Sunday.

I thought of the problems I would face in the army, like Sabbath keeping, bearing weapons, fighting, and so on. I was afraid because wars in the Middle East start anytime, anywhere.

When I thought about these problems, I started to rationalize and say to myself, "What difference does it make to keep the Sabbath? Every day is the Sabbath day; you just choose one day and the Lord will understand. What difference does it make?"

But the Holy Spirit was reminding me that God kept the Sabbath; it is part of the Ten Commandments; Jesus kept the Sabbath; the apostles and disciples kept it. Shouldn't we keep it? It must be important. Certainly God wants us to keep it.

Obedience to the Lord is extremely important. You could argue: what difference did it make when Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden tree and were kicked out of Paradise? The difference is obedience and loyalty to God and doing what is right. I was thinking that it couldn't be that all those people who do not keep Saturday holy are wrong. How about all of those other churches? Could one billion people be wrong? But, in reality, what makes things right or wrong is not the majority, religious leaders, or politicians, but Jesus Christ.

I remember that during that time I went and visited a pastor from every church and denomination and asked them about the Sabbath day. I came out of those meetings more convinced that the Sabbath is God's holy and special day and that in order to honor God we must keep it holy. This struggle was with me for several years.

When I graduated from high school, I received a scholarship that entitled me to four years of free college education. This scholarship was another problem for me. It was a great temptation to keep me

away from making my decision. Education was very important there, and it was my opportunity to live a happy, wonderful life.

My first year at the university was one of the hardest years of my life. I was having a tremendous struggle. I was caught between Christ on one side and the devil on the other. The devil was making the world seem too good to leave.

But the Holy Spirit was telling me about Jesus, who is too good to ignore. The Holy Spirit was telling me that Jesus is worth everything. Men and women left everything: family, friends, relatives, and jobs, and followed Him. They lived and died for Him.

It was the end of the school year, and final exams were coming up in a few weeks when my mother asked me to go to church with her. I came up with every excuse I could think of, but failed. So, in order to make my mother happy, I went with her to the Orthodox church. The occasion was the celebration of the ascension of Jesus into heaven. In the Orthodox church, every Sunday is devoted to one aspect of the life of Jesus or His teaching.

The pastor stood up in front of the large crowd gathered to celebrate the ascension of Jesus into heaven, and said, "My heart is troubled. Something happened to me last night that never happened to me before. The Lord awakened me last night and gave me another message for you. The new message is on martyrdom."

For someone who had not been to church for a while, the last subject I wanted to hear about was martyrdom. I wanted to hear about faith or hope or positive thinking, not martyrdom. But that sermon was the defining moment in my life. In fact, that sermon changed my life.

The bishop talked about the sacrifice Jesus made on our behalf at the cross. How the King of the whole universe stepped down and became a Man and lived and suffered and died for our sake. The question is: shouldn't we do the same? God is calling us to follow the example of Jesus, forsake all, and follow Him.

Then the bishop opened the Scriptures and read the following verse from Matthew 19:

> Then answered Peter and said unto him, Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore? And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life. But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first. (Matt 19:27-30, KJV)

But the Holy Spirit was telling me about Jesus, who is too good to ignore. The Holy Spirit was telling me that Jesus is worth everything.

He closed the Bible and very passionately started to talk about the disciples and the apostles and the early Christians who, for the sake of Jesus, left their homes, position, and families and followed Jesus. For Jesus' sake they gave their lives and suffered hardship and endured persecution. Jesus was first and last and everything to them. They are our example.

The point is, if Jesus gave up everything for us, even His life, shouldn't we do the same? If the disciples gave their lives to Him, shouldn't we follow their example and give up everything and follow Jesus?

A strange feeling came upon me. My heart was strangely warmed. I felt the presence of God. I was touched by the Holy Spirit. I heard the Holy Spirit speaking to me, telling me that following Jesus was worth it. There would be persecution, there would be problems, but Jesus with His love would always be with us.

At that moment God brought all the peace in the world to my heart. He brought His peace to me, and I decided to follow Him all the way. I turned to my mother and said to her, "You go home, and I will see you later." I walked from the Orthodox church to the home of the Seventh-day Adventist pastor and asked to be baptized that afternoon. I told him I was ready to bear the cross and follow Jesus all the way. I told him about my fears of losing my family—my brothers, my father, my mother—and my friends. But then I told him about the assurance the Lord gave me that day that He would be my family, my mother, my father, my brother, my sister, and my friends. He was worth it. I had decided to follow Him all the way.

The following Sabbath was the hardest Sabbath in my life. I had several final exams. I woke up at 5 a.m. and had a tremendous struggle. The devil was saying to me, "Just go and take the exams. Just one more Sabbath and you have the whole year under your belt. The Lord will understand. After all, what difference does it make to break another Sabbath?"

But the Lord was saying, "Follow Me, make Me number one in your life." This

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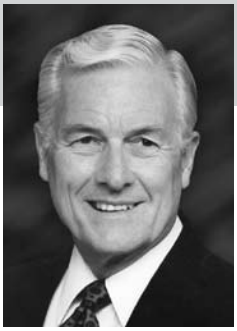

What Farmers Tell Us About the End of the World

by Herbert E. Douglass

A few years ago while on a speaking appointment, my wife Norma and I stayed with a Northern Alberta rancher who owned a huge acreage of wheat and soybeans. The cabs on his combines and spraying machines were about eleven feet off the ground! The fields stretched beyond eyesight; the wheat was gloriously growing.

I asked him one night how he knew when to start harvesting, knowing that a few days too early or too late would be a disaster. He said, "We know that merely looking at the rippling fields in the wind is not enough. We must open the heads of wheat in our hands. We must gauge the water content as well as the color. We don't go in until the grain is ripe. We must wait some years longer than others, but we must wait until the grain is ripe. And we don't wait one day longer."

His advice sounded so much like our Lord's counsel: "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground. . . . The earth yields crops by itself: first the blade, then the head, after that the full grain in the head. But when the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come" (Mark 4:26-29, NKJV).

Years later, Jesus reemphasized this harvest principle by giving John a picture of how the kingdom of God reaches its purpose on earth: "And I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and on the cloud sat one like the Son of Man, having on his head a golden crown, and in His hand a sharp sickle. And another angel came out of the temple, crying with a loud voice to Him who sat on the cloud, 'Thrust in Your sickle and reap, for the hour has come to reap, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe' " (Revelation 14:13-15).

What is Jesus saying here? *The first lesson I hear is that the purposes of the kingdom of God and of our backyard gardens (or our huge ranches) are the same—the harvest is ready when the seed has matured.* Who plants tomatoes or wheat, just for the fun of it? Of course, there is pleasure in planting the seed! Sinking the knees into warming April soil, planting peas one by one—is there a man or woman alive that doesn't know that joy? Yes, there is even fun in cultivating growing carrots and beans. But, really, we don't plant seeds merely for the fun of weeding down the rows, week after week! We plant because we enjoy those first, ripe red tomatoes, and the juice dripping down our faces, as we eat them in the garden!

If Jesus were asked, "Why are you delaying your coming?" He would respond, "I am waiting for the seed I have planted in my willing followers to mature."

In other words, just as farmers must wait for their seed to mature, so Jesus has told us that He will wait until the gospel seed has produced a harvest that He can stamp with His approval. When that harvest is ripe, when the wheat and the tares are fully mature, all the events we associate with the end will happen very quickly, such as the Latter Rain, Loud Cry, Sunday laws, etc. For example, the "Latter Rain" falls only on mature Christians, which makes possible the "Loud Cry."

The second lesson of our Lord's harvest principle is this: Farmers and prophets engage in conditional prophecies. Farmers know, for example, that early corn should be ready in 68 days, later corn in 74 days, some, 88 days. That is what my seed catalogue promises me!

Norma and I mark off the kitchen calendar those dates that our seed catalogue tells us when we should expect ripe carrots, beets, beans, tomatoes, etc. That is the date promised in the seed catalogue, if! If the corn gets enough rain, but not too much, if the nights stay warm in July, if the birds don't eat the corn—all these if's, the farmer has no control over.

Jesus is saying to everyone everywhere: "Listen to the parable of the farmer." If you are farming along the Nile or in the Ukraine, in Northern Alberta, or in rocky New England, the delay in the harvest of the world has not been due to a change of mind on the part of the Divine Farmer. As far as God's seed catalogue is concerned, the harvest could have and should have ripened decades ago.

We have been living in the time of the delayed harvest for far too long. The fruits of the Spirit that reflect the

character of Jesus have not yet matured. Paul often reflected on the parable of the harvest: "This I pray . . . that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God" (Phil. 1:9-11). "Because of the hope . . . which has come to you, as it has also in all the world, and is bringing forth fruit, as it is also among you since the day you heard and knew the grace of God in truth" (Col. 1:5, 6).

In letting the Bible speak to us, we save ourselves a lot of theological abstraction and jargon, as well as a lot of philosophizing—which is not much more than justification for whatever the human spirit wants to think or do.

If Jesus were asked, "Why are you delaying your coming?" He would respond, "I am waiting for the seed I have planted in my willing followers to mature." But we respond, "Why wait? We have had enough distress and horror in this crazy world. Must the world get even worse?"

Jesus presses His point, "My return is not dependent on world conditions but on the condition of my loyal followers who must give the world an honest, believable message that I can provide for them better than Satan's principles can. In other words, I won't come until the difference between the wheat and the tares is more fully developed, enough so that people in the final generation can make an intelligent choice between Satan's way and mine."

Why did Jesus, in Matthew 24 and 25, want us to keep our eyes on the maturing of His followers rather than on the world? Remember He said, "Take heed that no one deceives you. . . .You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, see that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. . . . There will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrow" (Matt. 24:4-8).

He continued: "Let me tell you where My focus has always been. The gospel of the kingdom that has brought so much joy and hope and power in your lives *will be preached* in all the world, . . . and then the end will come!" (verse 14). Rightly preaching the gospel is more than telling the world that Jesus died on Calvary! Most every Christian church, Protestant or Catholic, does that well! The gospel is the good news that Jesus has opened the door back to Eden by offering grace enough to pardon every sinner and grace enough to him or her to overcome those sins. We can't accept one without the other! For this reason, the gospel is preached only by those who are good witnesses to the real gospel—we must walk the talk.

For this reason, to place undue emphasis on world conditions, which are always in distress, would be similar to a farmer saying: "I oiled my combine, it must be time to harvest the wheat." Or, "It looks like there will be a bad thunderstorm. It must be time to pick my corn." There is as much relationship between a thunderstorm and picking ripe corn as there is between distress in the world and the return of Jesus.

In Revelation 7, John hears Jesus tell him that the Seven Last Plagues will continue to be restrained by God Himself until His followers are ready to be sealed! Wait He will, until His loyalists catch on as to what their final assignment really is—to be His matured people. He will wait until He has a people who, indeed, He can endorse with His signature, His name, on their foreheads! Only then will His promise be fulfilled—that His gospel will finally be preached in all the world, and *then the end will come!*

Just as farmers must wait for their seed to mature, so Jesus has told us that He will wait until the gospel seed has produced a harvest that He can stamp with His approval.

These sealed people, endorsed by God as His best reflection of what the gospel will do for everyone with a willing heart, will be the ripened harvest, people ready for His coming, ready to be translated.

***Herbert E. Douglass**, Th.D., is a theologian and retired college administrator. Born in Massachusetts, he was president of Atlantic Union College as well as an associate editor for the* Adventist Review. *A prolific writer, he has authored over 22 books, including* God At Risk; Why Jesus Waits; *and* Messenger of the Lord. *He currently resides in Lincoln, California.*

The View from the Pew

by Kristin McGuire

Let's not be fooled into thinking that we are limiting the prospects for membership by stigmatizing ourselves as the Remnant Church

When Jesus was here, and His days were numbered, one of His most significant experiences was when Mary Magdalene anointed Him with her very expensive perfume. "The Church" was scandalized by her extravagance (and Jesus' acceptance of it), but she did it anyway. Scoffing and indifference could not prevent Mary from creatively expressing her gratitude for what Jesus had done for her. She was forgiven much, so she loved much. This experience was so significant to Jesus that He wanted it to be told wherever the Gospel was preached.

I often wonder what I would have been doing that day at Simon's house. Would I have been weeping with Mary or scowling with Simon and Judas? Perhaps a good gauge of how we would treat Jesus if He were here is how we treat His church, which is here.

My sister Jen once used an expression that I have often repeated: "It may stink in the ark (i.e., the Church, the ark of safety), but it beats drowning in the ocean." I usually use it in response to very artistic people who lament the lack of manifest appreciation for creativity in the Church. I am very close to two wicked artistic people, my sister Jen and Norm, my husband. Thankfully, they are always seeking a place in the Church to bloom for Jesus, and it's a good thing they do. The church needs creative people. After all, they are mimicking their Creator. But, to be honest, the Church does not always warmly embrace these types of people, and often they go elsewhere with their talents, and the Church misses out on a great blessing.

There are also very creative people who use their talent and charisma to lead out in so-called supporting ministries of the Church. For example: restaurant work. The Lord used that vehicle to bring me into the church, for which I am eternally grateful. The problem was, because we were not active in the organized body, when the restaurants closed, we had nowhere to "bring the sheaves." Some that could have been brought into our midst and have long since begun their own active ministries are still waving S.O.S. flags.

Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for it. He purchased it with His own blood. Therefore, we cannot hate the Church if we love Christ. We are told that the relationship between Christ and His church is very close and sacred: He, the Bridegroom and the Church, the Bride.[1] In fact, Christ and His Church are inseparable.[2]

The metaphor of the New Jerusalem coming down from God out of Heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband, deeply moves me.[3] Perhaps this is because I appreciate my own husband's large affections for me, but even when I was single, I cried at weddings. Marriage is one of the closest ties two people can have.

Another is the mother-child relation. This, too, was used by a Bible writer as a spiritual illustration. I serendipitously came upon it when I needed comfort soon after I was baptized: "As one whom his mother comforts, so will I comfort you" (Isaiah 66:13, NKJV). "That's just what I need," I thought. But there's more. Isaiah goes on to say, "And you shall be comforted in Jerusalem." When the Bible refers to Jerusalem, we can apply it to the Church, because it is today's gathering place for the "called-out" ones, just as Jerusalem was in days of old.

When we seek to find our place in the Church, we are responding to the call, "gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children" (Joel 2:16),[4] and we are anticipating the outpouring of "the Spirit of grace and of supplications" (Zechariah 12:10). Taking our humble place among the "inhabitants of Jerusalem" positions us to continue "steadfastly in the Apostle's doctrine and fellowship" (Acts 2:42). Who would want to miss all the action? I would be remiss not to advise that a weekly prayer meeting in the Church would facilitate revival. Thus saith the Lord, "I will meet you (there)" (Exodus 29:42, 43).

Getting back to Mary. She gave her all to Jesus. If we are not giving Him our all through the Church, why not? Let's not be fooled into thinking that we are limiting the prospects for membership by stigmatizing ourselves as the Remnant Church (yikes!). If the claim comes from a reflection of the Christ-like life, which makes it appealing and convincing, then the great majority of God's true people, who are still in other churches, will be overjoyed to find us!

Bring them in!

(Endnotes)

1 See Ellen White, *Evangelism* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1946), 318.

2 Idem., *Testimonies for the Church,* vol. 3 (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1948), 418.

3 See Revelation 21:2.

4 Unless otherwise indicated, scripture quotations are taken from the *King James Version.*

Comforting a Hurting God *by Shawn Brace*

My wife and I attended a concert some time ago of a well-known Christian group. We decided to take my wife's brother and his new wife to the concert for their wedding gift. It was a good concert (and I really like the group's music), though portions of the concert were a little too raucous for me.

But there was a time in the concert when things got a little quieter and a little more somber. Before playing one of their more popular songs, the lead singer explained the story behind it.

Apparently, the group had befriended a little girl a few years before. Her parents had sent the group a video of their daughter, dancing to one of the group's songs, and the group immediately fell in love with the adorable girl. They started communicating extensively with her, e-mailing or calling her when they were on the road, and visiting her when they had concerts in her area. They were smitten with the charming child, to say the least.

Unfortunately, they received bad news one day while they were touring. The little girl was diagnosed with Leukemia, and things weren't looking very optimistic. The news immediately shook the group, and they kept close contact with the little girl and her family in the months that ensued. They tried to call and write as often as they could, and they visited her when the circumstances allowed.

One of the things that they were so amazed by was the faith of the little girl's mother. She was, of course, always by her daughter's bedside in the hospital, and she seemed to stay optimistic throughout the whole experience. One particular time, when the girl took a turn for the worse, the mother was seen standing over her little girl, with Bible opened on the floor, quoting Bible verse after Bible verse.

Sadly, the little girl never recovered, and the group received news one day that she had passed away. This, of course, shook them terribly, and out of immense agony and confusion, the lead singer penned the, now well-known, words, "I was sure by now/ God that you would have reached down/and wiped our tears away/stepped in and saved the day."[1] The opening words of the song reflect the pain of wondering why God didn't step in and intervene during such a tragedy.

The words struck a chord in listeners' hearts. Soon after the song's release, it catapulted to the number one spot on the Christian music charts, revealing the fact that the problem of pain is still as relevant to the human psyche as it has ever been.

Everyone wants to know where God is when we hurt.

You've Got Questions . . .

For as long as the question has been asked, answers have been supplied just as speedily. When confronted with questions about loss or tragedy, we are often pointed to places in Scripture that tell us about the presence of good and evil in this universe; or that God works out everything for the good of those who love Him; or that it is our privilege to participate in Christ's sufferings. These ideas may be good and true, and they may even be appropriate at times, but no matter how much we know the right answers, we are never immune from the pain that loss causes. Until further notice, death still has its sting on humanity, and it still leaves a scar.

About a year and a half ago, I received an e-mail from one of my good friends with some exciting news. He sent a mass e-mail out to all of his friends, announcing that he was engaged to a wonderful Christian young lady. Knowing his bride-to-be as well, I was very excited for the two of them. They happen to live in a country where there are very few Adventists, and the likelihood of finding a spouse of the same persuasion is very small. Sadly, a few hours after sending the e-mail, his fiancée was tragically killed in a car accident. She was 24-years-old, full of life and beauty. He, of course, was devastated.

Truthfully, we may not have all the right answers about tragedies such as this. And I'm not even sure that God necessarily wants us to. What He does ask of us, however, is to "consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (Hebrews 12:3).[2]

To be sure, the last thing we want to do is "grow weary" and "lose heart," so Christ invites us to simply "consider Him" for a moment.

I Come to the Garden Alone

In his epic work, *The Cross of Christ*, English theologian John Stott poignantly admits, "I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross. . . . In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it?"[3] Stott, of course, answers his own question by pointing to the fact that the question, itself, is irrelevant. God is not immune to tragedy. He is not immune to pain. He experienced the cross, in all of its fury.

Even before the cross, however, Christ's pain reached a height that no other human being has ever experienced, or was ever intended to experience. I'm sure you've trodden over Gethsemane's ground before, but another visit would perhaps help us "consider" Christ as He endured hostility.

You know the scene. Jesus comes to this place that He has so often visited before. It is a place that has brought many hours of comfort to His downtrodden soul.

This time is different, however.

While He invites all of His disciples to join Him, He especially invites His three closest disciples to continue on with Him. They are to be His companions for the evening, especially as the weight on His shoulders seems to get heavier and heavier.

To be sure, Peter, James, and John are quite perplexed by the scene that is

unfolding. Just a short time before, Jesus was riding a donkey through Jerusalem and people were hailing Him as their Messiah and King. Now He seems so dejected and depressed. They can't understand.

And then He says something that absolutely boggles their mind. He groans, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death." There wasn't one hand that had physically been laid on Him, and yet He was speaking of dying. Such a puzzling statement to make.

But the four continue walking together until Jesus suddenly stops and says, "Stay here and watch with Me."

Those last two words of the sentence are quite sobering. Jesus finishes the sentence by saying "with me," a tall task for mere mortals. He invites them to partake of that which He is going through. He invites His three most trusted and beloved disciples to join with Him in His hour of darkness.

After inviting the three to watch and pray, Jesus continues on alone. He, of course, had always felt alone on this earth, humanly speaking. Although He was constantly surrounded by other people, He was profoundly alone. He was different than they.

But, no matter how alone He had felt at times, He always felt the presence of His Father.

Now He is really alone. In the absence of divine companionship, to which He now feels separated, He desires human companionship. And that's why He encourages His closest disciples to stay close by His side and watch with Him. He desires their support.

Going only a little way away, He immediately falls to the ground and begins pleading with His Father. Drops of blood begin running down His face. He feels overwhelmed with the pain of the separation from His Father. He is convinced that He will never see Him again. He is convinced that His very existence will be obliterated forever.

In great pain and agony, He screams out, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will."

He retreats to the place where He left His three favorite disciples. For once in His life, He is looking for a word of comfort. He is looking for encouragement from the men He had so often encouraged.

But His heart sinks to the ground as He turns the corner and sees them. They are sleeping, oblivious to the fact that Christ is in desperate need of their help.

Deeply disappointed, He cries out, "What? Could you not watch with me Me one hour?"

Again He does the same thing, and again He returns to find them sleeping. He does it a third time, only to discover the same result.

Here were three men who, hours before, swore that they would always be there for Jesus. These were the guys who boasted of their allegiance to Him. Yet in Christ's darkest hour—when He was painfully estranged from His heavenly Father—His human friends separated from Him as well.

Having been let down by His human friends, Jesus is finally strengthened by an angel who has been sent on a heavenly mission. But not before the disciples were given ample opportunity to participate in something few humans have ever done—ministering to God Himself, helping, encouraging, and comforting Him at His darkest hour.

Ellen White adds extra insight about Christ's Gethsemane experience,

> The human heart longs for sympathy in suffering. This longing Christ felt to the very depths of His being. In the supreme agony of His soul He came to His disciples with a yearning desire to hear some words of comfort from those whom He had so often blessed and comforted and shielded in sorrow and distress. The One who had always words of sympathy for them was now suffering superhuman agony, and He longed to know that they were praying for Him and for themselves.[4]

It's a sobering thought—to think that God was in such a vulnerable position that He was hoping to be comforted by those whom He created. In His moments of pain and hurt and trauma, He, too, looked for answers. He, too, looked for a shoulder to cry on.

The truth of the matter is, God experiences pain on a level that we can't even comprehend. While we lament over the hurt that we experience, the heart of God hurts to an infinite degree. Gethsemane shows us as much.

But when it's all said and done, and we wonder about the problem of pain and suffering, I wonder if we're asking the right question. Perhaps the right question isn't where is God when *we* hurt? Perhaps the right question is where are *we* when *God* hurts?

Sadly, much like the disciples, we're sleeping. And at the hour God desires to be comforted by us the most, we are in a deep slumber, dreaming of fortunes and mansions on high.

This is not to downplay the pain we experience at all, nor is it to say that our hurt doesn't matter. What it is to say, however, is that as we hurt, God hurts alongside us—and even after. And in the hours of deep pain and despair, God longs for comforting just as much as we do.

Long ago, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, David foretold of Christ's experience in the book of Psalms when he wrote, "Reproach has broken My heart and I am so sick. And I looked for sympathy, but there was none, and for comforters, but I found none" (Psalm 69:20).

Will this be said of us when Christ comes to us, seeking comfort? In the midst of tragedy, God's pain goes far beyond any that we could experience. He experienced, and continues to experience, pain on a whole other level.

(Endnotes)

[1] Casting Crowns, "Praise You in This Storm," *Lifesong*, Reunion, 2005.

[2] All scriptures, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*.

[3] John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InverVarsity Press, 1986), 335.

[4] Ellen White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1898), 687, 688.

One More Time *by Mark Gagnon*

I remember it distinctly. It was early in my Christian experience. The evangelist who stood in the pulpit made a reference to "God's Hall of Fame." His choice of words piqued my interest, having been involved in sports for most of my life. The speaker proceeded to talk about some of the greats in Hebrews chapter 11 and how "by faith" they "subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises" (Hebrews 11:33) and are given to us as examples to emulate. Let me focus on one we find there, because at first glance, we might be tempted to question if perhaps the inspired writer made a mistake by including his name.

Certainly no one can doubt the list of accomplishments on Samson's resume. He was a leader, a judge, and a deliverer in Israel. His feats of strength in killing a lion, using a jawbone to slay the Lord's enemies and ripping the gates of a city off their hinges with his bare hands, are no doubt impressive. Yes, Samson had times when the Spirit of the Lord came upon him in a powerful way, but it was not for any of these reasons that we find his name listed in the pantheon of Bible greats. As a matter of fact, his many failures seem to disqualify him from admittance to Hebrews 11. There can be no doubt that this Nazarene, dedicated to God from birth, never fulfilled the destiny God had for him. He fell far short of making the glory of God paramount in his life to the point where we are told this about Samson: "God had borne long with him, but he had so yielded himself to the power of sin . . . [that] the Lord departed from him."[1]

But the darker the night, the brighter the stars shine. Likewise, the redemptive grace of God comes shining through in the darkest chapters of human experience. We find such a moment in Judges 16.

> Now the rulers of the Philistines assembled to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god and to celebrate, saying, "Our god has delivered our enemy into our hands, the one who laid waste our land and multiplied our slain." While they were in high spirits, they shouted, "Bring out Samson to entertain us." So they called Samson out of the prison, and he performed for them. When they stood him among the pillars, Samson said to the servant who held his hand, "Put me where I can feel the pillars that support the temple, so that I may lean against them." (Judges 16:23-26)[2]

But the darker the night, the brighter the stars shine. Likewise, the redemptive grace of God comes shining through in the darkest chapters of human experience.

What a scene to contemplate! The champion of Israel degraded and humiliated. Weak, blinded and bound in chains, he is led out to be mocked by those he had at one time vanquished under the mighty hand of God. But now he is reduced to a mere beast, his remaining strength used to grind grain in a pagan prison. Could there have been any lower point in Samson's life than this? Was he not tempted to feel that God had left him, and that because of his sin his case was hopeless? It must have seemed so to him in that dark hour.

But then we read this, "In suffering and humiliation, a sport for the Philistines, Samson learned more of his own weakness than he had ever known before; and his afflictions led him to repentance."[3] It was a repentance which God in His goodness had led him to. And now we see this former giant of a man, bowed and broken through life's defeats, discovering perhaps for the first time the mighty weapons of prayer and faith. Samson wields these into words that reach to the throne of One who can save to the uttermost. "Lord, remember me again. O God, please strengthen me one more time" (Judges 16:28, NLT). And as we see Samson reaching out his arms to take hold of those pillars to bring down the temple of his enemies, we see one "whose weakness was turned to strength" (Hebrews 11:34) and who "by faith" secured his place alongside God's greatest heroes.

What an inspiration Samson's story is to God's people today, especially as we fast forward to another scene. As we look to the future, do we not see in the prophetic portrait a remnant "captured"

by their enemies? Do we not see them reviled and covered with infamy as well? Satan presses in with his fierce temptations, causing them to think their cases are hopeless and that their past failings have separated them from God forever. Yet like Samson, they learn, in suffering and humiliation, the power of prayer and faith. In that dark hour they reach out and grasp two pillars of truth, the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.[4] And with faith that works by love, like Samson, they triumph and see their enemies fall.

As I think of that soon-to-be-played-out-scene, I call to mind conversations I've had with believers who wonder if they will be found standing with those faithful ones we read about in Hebrews 11. I'm not immune from these thoughts either. Instead of the confidence and assurance I know I should have, I find myself asking the question, "Who shall be able to stand?" But in those moments looking to the future, I find myself looking back and drawing strength and courage from another scene.

It's dark and foreboding, but there we see another Champion, led out to be publicly humiliated by His enemies. Like Samson, He too is mocked and degraded. He is weak and burdened with the transgressions of a guilty race. He, too, is blind, for He cannot see the reality of His Father's presence or the assurance of hope beyond the grave, "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Corinthians 5:21, KJV). As Samson's arms reached out, we see two wounded hands and Another's mighty arms outstretched. With one, He takes hold of a lost and dying world, and with the other He lays hold of the throne of God. Knowing full well the cost of man's redemption, He relinquishes His divine right to eternal life. In silent agony, apparently forsaken by His own Father, I hear a prayer arise, "Oh, Lord, remember Me, help Me . . . one more time!" With strength born of undying love, He raises on two nailed pierced feet the weight of that bruised and bleeding form. From the depths of a broken heart, we hear, "Let me die!" And with the "faith of Jesus," the kingdom of His enemy comes crashing down. Not only is the prince of this world cast out, but for God's people in these last days, so is all fear. In their darkest hour, they will prevail. They, too, will triumph gloriously, "one more time."

(Endnotes)

1 Ellen White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1890), 566.

2 All scriptures, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the *New International Version*.

3 Ibid.

4 See Revelation 14:12.

***Mark Gagnon**, a convert to Adventism, has served the church as a teacher, Bible worker, and pastor for 28 years. He and his wife Pam are in their eleventh year on Cape Cod, Massachusetts.*

The Beauty of Conversion

continued from page 3

over his head disappeared, the sunshine of God's grace radiated in his heart, and he became a new person. And all he had to do was look! He didn't have to go looking for God; God had been looking all that time for him. A simple concept. A homely truth. But how powerful in its essence.[3]

Two thrilling conversion stories. Two men who rocked their worlds. Yes, that we all would be so converted each day of our lives as pastors. May we not be satisfied with what we know and have. Rather, let us hunger and thirst for righteousness in the midst of these challenging times. There is still magnificent power in the message of the gospel as it is allowed to reach the inner recesses of the heart. Not only for the individual, but also for the corporate church.

(Endnotes)

1 Taken from http://www.gbod.org/worship/default.asp?act=reader&item_id=5951&loc_id=639,624 (accessed May 5, 2008).

2 Taken from http://www.spurgeon.org/misc/abio011.htm (accessed May 5, 2008).

3 Both of these conversion stories are told more fully and eloquently by little-known Christian essayist, F.W. Boreham, in his delightful book, *A Bunch of Everlastings* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1920). I would encourage you to get your hands on a copy if you can. It is one of my most treasured books on the shelves of my study. It was given to me in 1974 by my former academy principal and mentor, Richard Hammond.

***Bill Brace** has been involved in urban ministry for over twenty-five years. He pastors Seventh-day Adventist congregations in Braintree and Norwood, Massachusetts. In addition, he maintains an active radio ministry. His program "Portraits of God" is currently heard on several stations around the United States. He and his wife, Melanie, live in Norfolk, Massachusetts, and they have three grown children, one son-in-law, a daughter-in-law, and a beautiful granddaughter.*

Escape From Iraq—Part 1

continued from page 5

struggle lasted from five to eleven-thirty. And it was about that time when the Lord won out. They gave up on me at the church. But I did show up at about noon and made my public commitment to follow Jesus. I was baptized in the name of Jesus and started to keep my first Sabbath that same day.

However, immediately after that, a flood of problems fell on me. First, there were those three exams for me on that Sabbath day and because of that, I lost my first year in the university. Iraq operates on the English system of education, which states that failing two or more subjects or not taking two or more exams means failing the whole year and repeating it.

Consequently, for the same reason I lost my second year in the university. Failing the two years meant the loss of the scholarship I had earned, which was supposed to cover my four years of college education.

When my father saw what was happening, he thought I was crazy. He thought I was out of my mind or under some kind of spell. He became very angry and called all my relatives on the phone and asked them to come to our house. The house was completely full of at least 100 persons crammed into our living room, a place maybe 15' by 18'.

In the Middle East we have big families. I have seven uncles on my father's side. Four of them have six children or more, and it is about the same on my mother's side. It was impossible to get all those people together for a family reunion. But when they heard I was taking the Bible seriously and had started to keep the Sabbath as Jesus commanded, they all came to discourage me and talk me out of it.

The house was full. Everybody was talking to me at the same time. I was confused and under severe tension. Finally, when my dad thought he was not getting anywhere with me, he took off his shoes and threw them on me and spit on me (a sign of the ultimate disgrace in the Middle East). When one of my cousins saw this happening, he and one of my brothers lifted me up by the shoulders and ears and hair and started to beat on me. Soon many more joined them, beating on me and spitting on me from all directions. When I was about to go unconscious, bleeding and hurting, they threw me out into the street. When I landed on the pavement, I heard my dad saying, "I don't want to see you again until you change your mind and forget about the craziness you are in." Then I went unconscious for a while.

***S. Joseph Kidder**, D.Min., has been teaching in the area of spiritual formation, evangelism, and leadership at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary for the last eight years. Prior to that he pastored for 20 years. His wife, Denise, is an elementary school teacher. They live in Berrien Springs, Michigan, and they have two children, Jason and Stephanie.*

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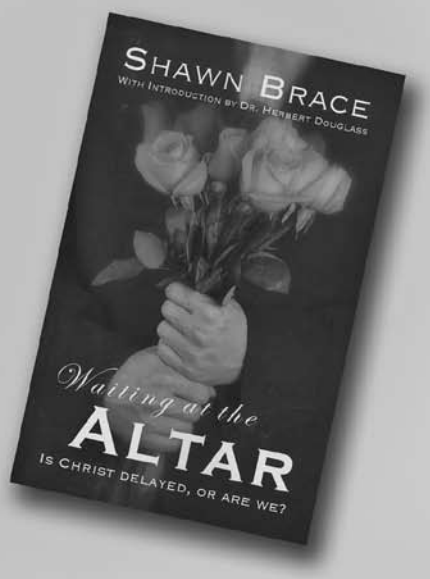

Frontline Savior

by Shawn Brace

I don't know about you, but I often struggle to figure out if I should read the Preface to a book or not. I figure if the author had something extremely important to say, he would just state it in the chapters. Why place it in the Preface?

But recently, while reading C. S. Lewis's classic, *Mere Christianity*, I decided to give the Preface a try. And as I sifted through the first couple pages, about ready to give up on the rest of it, I came across a delightful idea that struck a chord with me. Using simple imagery, Lewis writes, "Ever since I served as an infantryman in the First World War I have had a great dislike of people who, themselves in ease and safety, issue exhortations to men in the front line. As a result I have a reluctance to say much about temptations to which I myself am not exposed."[1]

I'm sure this simple idea resonates with you. As pastors, we don't really enjoy advice from individuals who have not walked in our shoes before—or even those who haven't been in them for a few decades. We also see this in our members, who take more comfort from us when they know that we can identify with their struggles. Just this past Sabbath, in fact, one of my church members shared with me, as she walked out after my sermon, that she really appreciated my openness about some of the struggles I face. Somehow, when our church members know that we, too, are human, they are a lot more willing to listen to our words of encouragement.

But beyond that, Lewis's words, though unintentional, speak to our relation to God as well. The Bible is replete with words of encouragement, advice, and commands that originated in the heart of God. It seems one cannot turn a page in the Bible without being overwhelmed with the fact that the Christian has a high calling: we are to follow the Lamb wherever He goes and overcome sin by His grace.

But the beauty of the gospel tells us that we do not have a God who has given us such admonitions from the "ease and safety" of heaven. Indeed, we have a Savior who offers advice and encouragement, not as an outsider, but as One who has battled on the "front lines" of humanity as well. As Hebrews 4:16 reminds us, "For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin."[2] Thus, when the clarion call comes down—be it from Sinai or heaven—that we are to "resist" temptation, we can take comfort in knowing that Christ has been on the front lines, fighting the battle Himself.

Incidentally, this wonderful understanding of Christ's identification with humankind separates us from the rest of Christendom. In some ways, it doesn't matter if a person has a prelapsarian or postlapsarian view of Christ's human nature, we, as Seventh-day Adventists, have a much closer Savior than do the rest of our Christian brothers and sisters. I was intrigued when I read, in response to Adventism's debate on the nature of Christ, that Evangelical "theologians have usually insisted that we must not say that Christ could have sinned" at all.[3]

What a narrowed view of a Savior who really did battle on the front lines; a Savior that really did face the same temptations that you and I face; a Savior that really could have sinned. If such an idea is stripped from Christ's humanity, then we are left with a God who merely play-acted for 33 years and cannot truly identify with our struggles. We are left with a God who can only offer good advice, but is far removed from the realities of His creation.

Thankfully, that is not what the Bible attests to. We have a Savior who spent 33 years engaging in hand-to-hand combat with the struggles of humanity. We have a Savior who thus encourages us to "come boldly to the throne of grace, that we might obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:17). We have a Savior who pleads with us to overcome just as He "also overcame" (Revelation 3:21).

Indeed, we have a frontline Savior.

(Endnotes)

1 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), xii.

2 All scriptures are taken from the *New King James Version*.

3 Anthony J. Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults: Christian Science, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism, Seventh-day Adventism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1963), 114.

Shawn Brace *pastors four congregations in New Hampshire and Vermont. His first book,* Waiting at the Altar*, will be published this summer. He and his wife, Camille, live in Warner, New Hampshire, and they enjoy anything involving the outdoors.*

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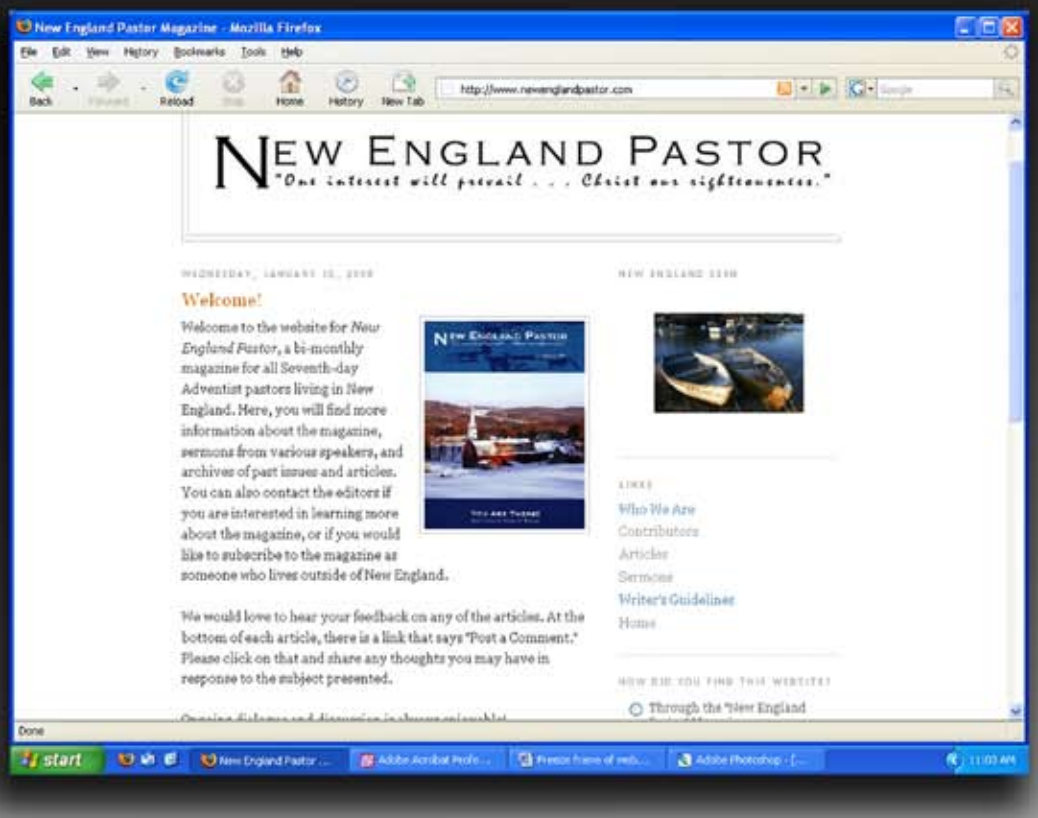

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